Wired to the World

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The Fuss Over Windows 8

The new Windows operating system version 8 has become a catch all for problems in society. Some even blame the current economic doldrums on the introduction of Windows 8. More down to earth personal computer manufacturers blame Windows 8 for a decline in year to year unit sales. A small scale industry has grown up around bashing Windows 8 in the media. Windows 8 is an attempt by Microsoft at creating a new Apple-like interface for desktop, laptop, tablet and other mobile devices. At first glance it can be very confusing, especially if you like to view movies on VHS players and have trouble re-setting the video player clock from 12:00! The new software attempts to make all personal computers look like an iPad. Instead of launching programs from a desktop start menu as in earlier Windows products, Windows 8 uses a series of application tiles to launch a program. It was hoped that the new platform would enable users to do similar tasks on a variety of devices from cell phones to desktop computers.

With the April 2014 demise of Microsoft support for Windows XP, I decided to replace an aging but loyal laptop with a new Windows 8 machine. (I was noticing more and more XP laptops at yard sales…so yes, I can take a hint.) I got a really good deal on Mother's Day weekend from a big box retailer. I actually paid around 10 % of what a Mac Book Pro could have cost for my machine. However having had a number of simple to use Apple products in my career, I was not sure at first how the Windows 8 experience would go. I am happy to report that the learning curve for me was very short. Maybe it was the Apple OS experience that helped, or more likely Windows 8 is a really good operating system. Many of the old XP (in fact Windows 95) features are available in Windows 8. Shortcuts like Windows Logo D will bring up the desktop, as does Windows Logo E produce the Windows Explorer. Perhaps the biggest fuss is made over the lack of the Start Menu in Windows 8. Well to summon the start menu all you have to do is hold down the Windows Logo key and there it is! Not too hard is it? Granted point and click is what made Windows a good GUI interface in the beginning, but using a keyboard shortcut is not really that hard. One thing I do find hard to get used to, is that the menus come and go with Windows 8 depending on where you mouse or click. My favorite disappearing menu is the "charms" bar on the right side of the desktop. The charms bar enables the user to search through a running application, share files with others, get to the famous start screen, and send the current screen to another device, or tweak six major settings: power, keyboard, network, volume, screen and notifications. Unfortunately the charms bar can come and go depending on where you mouse or click. (However Windows Logo C will lock it in place.) The bottom of the Windows 8 desktop has a task manager pane that also seems to come and go at random. You can also lock this bar in place by simply clicking in a blank area

and then selecting "lock the taskbar." A similar vanishing pane is on the left side of the desktop. This bar shows a list of recently used applications. The bar can be displayed by pressing the Windows Logo and Tab key. Each press of the Tab key then highlights a recently used application. If you release the Windows Logo key, the last displayed application will fill the desktop. You can close the application by pressing the Delete key.

Windows 8 will not solve the current European debt crises, but it will make your Windows machine operate more like an iPad. Don't want to do that? A growing chorus of user complaints is forcing Microsoft to issue a Windows 8.1 free upgrade in the fall of 2013. The upgrade will include an option to start your Windows 8 machine in the familiar Windows desktop mode. It seems that Windows users don't want to learn another operating system, they just want to get to their applications faster. Well guess what, that is what the Windows 8 application tiles were supposed to do. I suggest that you try out the new version and see if you do like the new tablet-like tiles. They work just fine for me, but the disappearing management panes do take some getting used to. I migrated from Windows 3.1 to Windows 95, so using the latest Windows operating system is something that I enjoy doing. I hope you will give it at least a try. Now is a good time to pick up a non-touch screen Windows 8 machine at a real bargain price.